
Hot Mint in Chennai

A journey into Sowcarpet and beyond



Colin Todhunter

Hot Mint in Chennai: A journey into Sowcarpet and beyond

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About the author

Colin Todhunter has been visiting India since the mid- 1990s and has been observing and documenting the country off and on for 30 years. He usually writes on food, agriculture and development issues and in 2018 was named a 'Living Peace and Justice Leader and Model' by Engaging Peace Inc. in recognition of his writing.

In this e-book, he has turned his hand to travel writing, focusing on the South Indian city of Chennai.

Introduction

This short book comprises 13 chapters and began life in 2013. It became a stop-start affair with years of inactivity and was finally finished in 2025. Although there are a few excursions that take the reader elsewhere along the way, things tend to focus on the South Indian city of Chennai (Madras), especially the densely populated Sowcarpet area.

Sowcarpet is the city's most vibrant and certainly the most culturally diverse district. Many people from North India, particularly Rajasthan and Gujarat, have settled there. It forms part of bustling George Town, which is adjacent to the port. Although Chennai is now a sprawling metropolis of around 12 million people, George Town is still considered by many to be the heart of the city.

The chapters are quite brief; many can be described as bite-size insights. Some readers may find the brevity and rapid pace of the chapters leave little room for deeper analysis or extended reflection. This is a conscious choice: the aim is to capture an immediate sense of place through short, vignette-style chapters that mirror the fragmented, fast-moving reality of Chennai street life.

Rather than slow the narrative with extended analysis, the city's rhythms and moments are left to speak for themselves. To add flavour to the text, 16 low-resolution screenshot images from the Sowcarpet/George Town area are included.

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Chapter 1

High-Octane Shadowlands

A mad dash through rain that falls as large solid ice cubes. Ouch! It's painfully wet outside.

Paharganj is flooded. The power is down. Fume spewing back-up generators work overtime. Buses at bursting point, traffic splashes. Only the foolish are out in the open.

Drenched, but made it. Sprawling New Delhi railway station. Packed trains rumble by, and half of India seems to be on the move. The chitter-chatter of anticipation among those waiting for their trains to arrive. Weariness from imprisoned passengers who peer out from barred windows, passing by from distant places on their way to distant destinations, half a subcontinent away.

Frenzy on the dimly lit platform as a rain-soaked train stops from somewhere on its way to somewhere else.

Officials with clip boards attract gathering crowds. Desperate for a spare berth, wait-listed tickets are hastily produced by would-be passengers. Inspectors check their charts.

Anxiety prevails. Crowds push their way onto the train, other crowds push their way off. Chai sellers and snack sellers yell, touting their wares and porters race for custom. It's the organised bedlam of a train platform in India when a train pulls in. It's smack-between-the-eyes, high-octane India.

Another train arrives. My train. Ten o'clock to Chennai. The Tamil Nadu Express. A thousand people wait to board. A thousand times

I've done this before. Stray dogs, porters, chai stalls and soup sellers. Lock and chain vendors and constant announcements in Hindi and English.

A beggar's outstretched hand, a crying child, then all aboard to soon pass the shiny office blocks around Connaught Place. Side to side, the sway of life, the beat of the trip. Indian Railways, cities in transit, cities on wheels. Going to sleep just outside Delhi, waking up somewhere half-way to Nagpur, with the endless monotonous rhythm of clickety-clack, wheels on track.

Last night dragged. A light switched on, then off again, then on. Someone boarded, someone else got down... at Agra... at Gwalior... at Jhansi. Now, all but an awful blur in the night. And Bhopal emerged around 'bread omelette' for breakfast.

Sleeplessness in sleeper class, with the early morning alarm of shouting chai sellers swarming through the carriage.

A fellow traveller offers an orange bought in Nagpur station — Nagpur, the orange-growing capital of India. The millionth chai or coffee wallah passes by. The coffee flows, pakoras are munched and stations come and go. And then, into the south. Scorched baked earth transforms to lush green land fringed with streams and peppered with temples. Rice paddies, coconut trees, banana trees, bullocks in fields, women harvesting crops and men on bicycles winding their way along dirt paths.

However, another night of incarceration beckons. The train, a prison, but the guarantor of liberty, delivering us to freedom, which draws closer by the hour. A baby is sick. The vomit flows. Its mother wipes away the mess. Discarded rag on floor.

Time drags, wiping its vomit-ridden feet on yet another station platform. And then Vijaywada, the last major stop, arrives late evening as people bed down for the second night of on-off lights and sleeplessness no doubt.

Day breaks. The sun pokes its head through the mist. The morning dew washes the gloom away. It's Tamil Nadu by the train window. It's Tamil Nadu gazed at over the rim of another plastic cup of sickly-sweet coffee. It's Tamil Nadu washed down with sambar-idli for breakfast and viewed with a clanging sleep deprivation headache.

Towns and cities fly by, buildings encroach on farmland, then the sleepy fields are gone. Urban India prevails, sprawling ever outwards, eating up some of the country's most fertile land. No doubt some real estate developer's financial bonanza. The farmland adjacent to cities tends to be highly fertile — one reason that determined many a city's location in the first place.

Urban India — the chaotic, sometimes ugly face of the country far removed from the slow-paced life of the smaller towns and villages. Often cheek by jowl though, where city meets field, where shadows cast their darkness on the land.

A flyover on the edge of Chennai. Buses, trucks, the Ashok Leyland car plant at Ennore. Keeping pace with the traffic on adjacent National Highway 6.

A slum area edges the tracks where we stop for the signal to change. The concrete-box dwellings with vegetation for roofs. Sheds and outhouses spill towards the line.

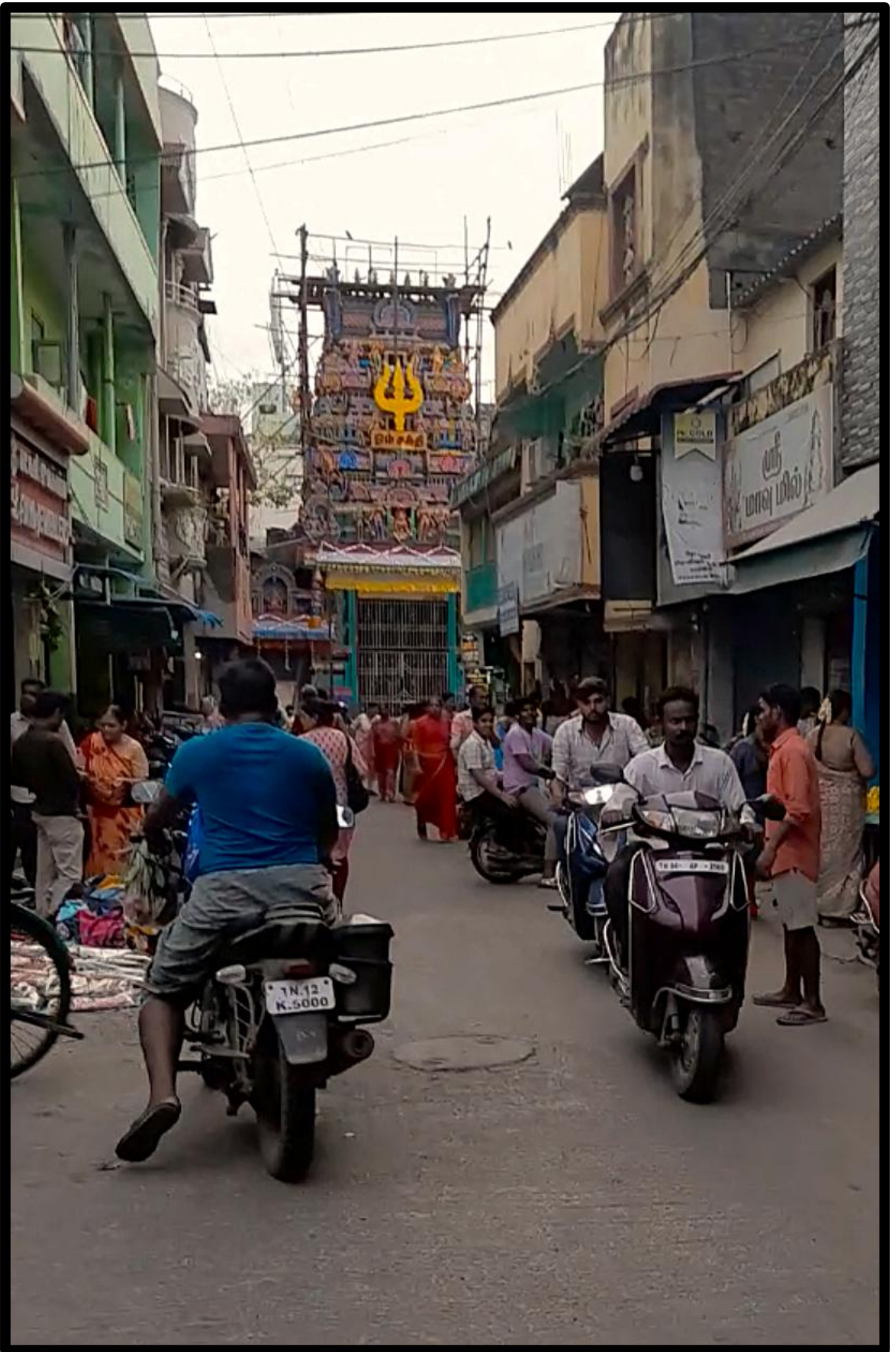
People squat and cook with stoves in full glare of train passengers. No hint of self-consciousness as yet another train cuts through the neighbourhood. Then, the final few miles. Always a slow crawl.

The neatly painted yellow and black signs in Tamil on the walls. The 'Welcome to Madras' sign, and the packed suburban trains. It's commuter time.

It's 7.00 am. Then suddenly, the sign. It's the sign I've been waiting to see ever since I left Delhi, ever since I checked out of my grubby hotel on Paharganj — 'Basin Bridge Junction'. Chennai Central, just around the bend.

The packed Saravana Bhavan restaurant in the station. The cavernous waiting hall. The Higginbotham's bookstore. The underpass to get to the huge government hospital opposite the station to flag an auto. The haggling for a fare.

Chennai. The end... the beginning.



Chapter 2

Walls and Taxes

Many a long and tiring journey begins or ends in this huge, cavernous hall. Rows and rows of seats, endless platforms and big electronic boards with train numbers, train names and destinations. Trains to and from Jaipur, Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and just about anywhere in the country. A 34-hour, late-night journey departure on the Tamil Nadu Express to Delhi, or the once a week 24-hour-long journey to Vasco De Gama in Goa: whether it's a case of coming or going, Chennai's Central Station is where new beginnings start and where hope prevails.

Chennai Central is a building that plays host to the aspirations of the transient masses. It's the main gateway to elsewhere for this sprawling metropolitan area of 10 million-plus inhabitants. It's the building to head for to start out for far-flung destinations, for new horizons.

Despite the building's red-brick Victorian-era façade with landmark clock tower, Chennai Central is pure Indian, pure Tamil. Its eateries offer dosas, idlis, 'pure veg' rice meals, helpings of sambar gravy and delicious kesarai or rasamalai for those with a sweet tooth. And long-standing icons of Chennai are firmly rooted, from the Higganbothams bookstore to the Saravana Bhavan restaurant branch.

Sinewy men, turbaned heads and dressed in red. They carry heavy loads. These 'coolies' or porters are made from granite. In any big station in India, they can be seen carrying massive loads on head for passengers along platforms and up and down bridges to get to other platforms, often in searing heat. And many are by no means young. No bulging biceps, but strong, solid men of ligament and sinew, of iron and steel, of dependability.

In the main station building itself, in the modern multi-storey building to the left and in the imperious, magnificent domed grey British-era building to the right, a hundred dimly lit rooms house officials. A world of dusty computer screens, wooden desks, clipboards, filing cabinets, electronic rail maps, endless wall charts and stern-looking men.

This is a place of bureaucracy and rigid hierarchy, of conformity and rules. And it's what helps Indian Railways tick. And tick it must and does because many of its trains might carry up to two thousand people, all requiring seats, berths, bedding, food, water and punctuality. Despite some long-haul trains possibly running 10 hours late, passengers are more or less guaranteed all the above, including a certain degree of punctuality.

In unreserved coaches, people sleep on dirty floors, hard dusty benches or in overhead luggage racks. Then, there are the reserved sleeper coaches and 'pantry' coaches (now, in 2025, done away with — food tends to be bought in and collected at designated stations en route), where food is cooked and served. Indian trains are cities in transit.

By international standards, these trains are painfully slow. Even 'express' trains reach up to 140 km per hour and only, given the long stops at stations or in between, average 50 km per hour over the duration of the journey. But the system works, and it works fairly well given the overburdened infrastructure and the millions needing to be transported every day and night.

But outside, beyond the world of Indian Railways, another world beckons. Along the adjacent Wall Tax Road, which runs parallel to the tracks, numerous hotels — many of the dark and dingy fleapit variety — offer a bed for the night. The delights on offer in these self-proclaimed 'deluxe' lodges and hotels might include deluxe stained bedding, deluxe dubious standards of cleanliness and small reception areas with pot-bellied men lounging around on deluxe musty beg-bug sofas in off-white vests and lungis.

Others are a little more modern, even one or two are quite decent, but they are certainly not the best that Chennai has to offer. From flophouse to not-so-flophouse, they can all be found along Wall Tax Road. The 'wall' in the title refers to a protective wall that the British built in the 1700s. And the tax refers to a tax that was intended to be collected (but never was) for the road that ran adjacent to the wall.

Wall Tax Road with its lodges, parcel services, travel agents, fax and photocopy shops, electronics stores and assortment of other outlets is certainly nothing to write home about. Wall Tax Road with its basic eateries of Formica-covered wooden tables, banana leaf meals, metal water mugs and garlanded pictures of Hindu gods.

Eateries where staff wait for custom. Eateries where men might sit behind the cash desk for endless hours. I once asked someone, "Do you get bored in your job?" He answered, "No, it is my duty."

The cashier in question embodied the notion of dharma, a key concept in Indian philosophy. At its core, dharma refers to the cosmic order, moral and religious duties, virtuous living and the right way of life. It sustains the universe's order.

Integral to the concept is svadharma: personal duty based on position in life, skills and circumstances. Performing your job diligently, regardless of how mundane it may seem, is part of fulfilling svadharma.

The Bhagavad Gita emphasises the importance of doing one's duty without attachment to the results. This concept suggests that any work done with the right attitude can be a form of spiritual practice. Dharma also encourages being fully present in the moment.

By maintaining awareness and focus on current actions, a worker can find depth and meaning in seemingly repetitive tasks. Many dharmic traditions

emphasise the importance of seva (selfless service). By viewing their work through the lens of dharma, people can transform their perception of mundane jobs from boring routines into meaningful practices, providing a sense of contentment and purpose, even in jobs that might otherwise be considered tedious or unexciting.

Before functionality set in, Wall Tax Road was Chennai's entertainment hub in pre-independence India, housing three theatres, the last one of which closed in 2007. But during the night, it still gives the impression that this could well be an entertainment hot spot, if only because of the neon lit hotel signs. But it is not. Apart from a few seedy male-only populated hotel bars, night-time on Wall Tax Road flatters to deceive, and the darkness attempts to hide the poor who sleep close to roadside muddy pools or garbage. Darkness has a habit of beautifying urban India by masking the muck and squalor.

This is a typical road that you might find next to railway stations throughout India. Lined with solid looking buildings, with bamboo cutters and hawkers near the station end, this is an arterial thoroughfare that gets you from one part of the city to another. And yet, despite the functionality, Wall Tax Road provides a hint of much more intriguing things that lie down its chaotic side streets and lanes. The road marks the western boundary of Sowcarpet.

On the road itself, cycle rickshaws fly by, trucks are parked up and sacks and boxes are delivered to numerous wholesale outlets. These activities of Chennai's most interesting area spill onto Wall Tax Road. Just head down one of its lanes and you enter Sowcarpet and the wider George Town neighbourhood. Wall Tax Road itself may well be a rather mundane affair, but its many side streets will take you into little Gujarat, little Rajasthan and what is essentially a taste of North India on South India's Coromandel Coast. It's where migrants from the north settled and made the area their own.

If you never veer off Wall Tax Road, you will never know what you are missing. Between it and the coast a few kilometres or more away, there is

George Town, the city's traditional heart. But immediately between it and the hub of George Town lies Sowcarpet (loosely translated from Hindi as 'moneylender': pawnbrokers and moneylenders from North India set up shop here originally).

Venture off Wall Tax Road and you venture into Sowcarpet. And, if you do, you might just fall in love with it. But it's not an easy area to love.

It's harsh, congested, muddy, polluted and one look at the area might be enough to send many a faint-hearted soul packing on the next train out.

But Sowcarpet rocks... to a constant, intense and heavy beat. This is a jam-packed residential area; jam-packed with commercial enterprises too. There is a lovely painted church on Wall Tax Road but move further into the side streets and you will discover numerous Hindu and Jain temples. A couple of Jain Temples on Mint Street, which runs parallel to Wall Tax Road and constitutes Sowcarpet's main thoroughfare, are a profusion of marble, intricate carvings and architectural splendour. They stick out like proverbial sore thumbs, but in a truly positive way.

To get from Wall Tax Road to Mint Street is about a seven-minute walk. A walk that takes you into a world of mud, dust, cycle carts and cycle rickshaws, the loading and hauling of hard manual labour, stray cattle and dogs, pale faces from North India and Hindi and Gujarati scripts on signs. Women dress in lehenga choli, wear sarees North Indian style and often cover their hair and face completely with veils.

In Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, this is an area where Tamil Nadu tends to take a back seat...



Chapter 3

Stretchable Discomfort in Sowcarpet

It's uncomfortable. Taking a cold shower and still sweating in the process. Everything in the room feels damp. Even the bed sheets. Monsoon in Chennai. By the time you head down two flights of stairs, you are again dripping. By the time you are out on the street, you are again pouring. Heat and humidity have no mercy.

Out of the front door and onto Wall Tax Road. It's never a pretty affair, never an uplifting start to the day. The roadside seems to be permanently dug up — for cable or pipeline repair or some other maintenance problem that makes the place look like a building site with no end in sight.

The buses, two-wheelers, cycle carts and autos jostle for space against a backdrop of incessant horn blurting. And the pedestrians who must negotiate the fume-belching vehicles, dug-up lumps of hardened dirt, bits of metal that randomly protrude from the concrete and discarded industrial springs and coils. It's uncomfortable.

Being near Chennai's Central Station, Wall Tax Road is a place for doing business. Couriers, booking agents, seedy hotels and sweatbox eateries that refresh local workers who sell their muscle power or the transient masses from the station at the end of the street.

The traffic, its noise and pollution and the years of caked-on grime make the street the type of place to pass through or avoid. It's functional at best. As a former entertainment hub, you would be hard pushed to say the street still has an air of faded grandeur. Traditionally designed buildings have long been replaced, and the few remaining ones tend to be crumbling.

Turn into one of the many alleyways that lead up to Mint Street for some respite. Wade through one of the lakes of dirty water at the entrance, then it's about a seven or eight-minute walk past a wall of four-to-eight storey concrete-box buildings on either side before reaching Mint Street.

Along the way, one-room grinders, millers, print shops, engineering workshops, paint stores and more. Hauling and lifting from cycle and bullock carts and small vans and trucks, bare-chested young men wearing lungis barely break sweat as they collect and deliver machines, boxes, sacks and metalware. At least they work in a degree of comfort — the shadowland backstreets of Sowcarpet allow some escape from the sun.

It's not the only type of deliveries you get around here. A maternity hospital that pops out kids suddenly pops out itself, indistinguishable from any other building, apart from the sign; and a school — similar. Surprising additions packed into this street of mundane grind. Each alleyway almost a small town in itself.

And off the alleyway, more alleyways. In the distance, a woman wearing a saree rides a moped into the haze of humidity — or is it dust pollution — never to be seen again as she disappears into the hundreds of side streets of this over-populated Sowcarpet area where a quick estimate might place the resident population at 30,000. Almost a city within a city.

Foreigners from the Western countries stay elsewhere in Chennai and hardly come here. It is not listed in the guidebooks as a must-see place or as containing the sights to be seen.

Sowcarpet is defined by the industry of its people, the industries of the area and the eclectic mix of India you find here.

But enter Sowcarpet, take a walk along its most famous thoroughfare — Mint Street — and you could be forgiven if you thought you were suddenly in Gujarat, Rajasthan or some other state from more northerly parts. It's



an area where migrants from those places decided to settle during the last century.

And as Mint Street finally arrives on this early November day, it is as it always is. A couple of goats climbing onto the seats of parked up mopeds. A stray cockerel paying a visit from one of the alleyways. A huge light-grey bullock hauling a cart through the crowds. A cow hoping to steal some fruit from one of the carts at the side of the street. And a dog panting in the heat with teats almost touching the ground. Yes, for some, it can be uncomfortable here too.

And the humans of course. The humans whose every need and whim must be catered for. They must be watered, fed, adorned. They must engage in religious ritual and social interaction... and shopping.

The cavernous Jain community halls and impressively designed temples. The intricately carved gopurums (towers) of their Hindu counterparts. The glass-fronted clothes and jewellery stores, and the open-fronted dhabas and chai shops where the dust from outside comes free.

And the street carts lined up selling fruit, veg and clothing. Women in brightly coloured materials hover like bees, collecting the latest bargain to be had. Shopping is an artform — one I will never understand. My strategy is to get in, buy and get away. Mission accomplished. But where would places like Mint Street be if that were everyone's method of attack?

Buying a new item of clothing can be an all-day affair. Groups of women chat, drink chai and sit on the shop floors of material sellers who bring out their rolls for inspection. If it's material to be worn for a special occasion, it takes time. And time is a stretchable concept in India.

When someone says something will be ready in five minutes, that could mean an hour. Earlier, the hotel manager had informed me that the power will be back on in "five minutes —we must fill the generator with 55 litres of

diesel”. Forgetting to leave out the fact it could well take an hour to procure the fuel beforehand.

So, I returned to my room to continue sweating under the stationary fan.

Half an hour later, still no power. I was then informed about the procurement issue. I had been under the impression that the 55 litres were already being poured into the generator. But after spending years in the country, deep down I knew five minutes could never be five minutes.

Indian stretchable time often sees a few minutes being stretched into hours. The piece of string is infinite. As the tourist board says — Incredible India! But I don’t think it was ever meant to be said while shaking the head and sighing with complete resignation.

It can at times seem strange that five minutes does often become an hour because a lot of things are performed at breakneck speed. Like the horn-blurting maniacs in autos and on scooters on pedestrian-dominated Mint Street who must get from A to B as if ‘B’ is about to burn to the ground. Maybe they are all on a mission, trying to procure 55 litres of diesel for their generators and prevent five minutes turning into two hours.

In India, time can be either painfully slow or painfully quick. And especially in Sowcarpet, it can be elastic, or it can contract and even appear to stop.

Take an everyday scene from the area. It could be a village in Gujarat. A 20-something woman of North Indian ancestry in nine yards of non-stretchable material wrapped around her body and head with only face visible. She could be from the 1960s, 1980s or some other decade. But the giveaway that this is Chennai in 2022 is the ubiquitous cell phone pressed to the side of the head.

To those from foreign shores, she might look a bit out of time and out of place. The same could be said of Sowcarpet itself. But the people here and the area are very much in time, in tune and in place. Custom, tradition and regional and self-identity are so deeply intertwined. As intertwined as the hive of one-room workshops and businesses. As intertwined as the alleyways themselves and the stretchability of time and place that transcends the decades.



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Chapter 4

Beauty Rides a Hero Honda

Slap... bang... it's a full-force smack in the face! It's the wall of heat that hits on exiting Chennai's Central Railway Station. Turn left then left again and it's not long before the road narrows and things get even hotter. A stone's throw from the station and it's off the train and into the sweltering world of Mint Street.

This isn't the sanitised world of AC shopping-mall India that's much talked about by the media. It's the earthy Sowcarpet area of north Chennai. This isn't the place of latest fashion trends, burger dens or cool-cola hangouts. It's a world of wholesale markets, cycle rickshaws and tightly packed buildings.

This is a place of congested streets, narrow lanes and wandering cattle. It's a place many Chennai-ites have heard about but may not have visited. The main pavement-less thoroughfare, Mint Street, is a relentless offering of temples, hardware stores, eateries and clothes shops.

It's a hard-rock affair on Mint Street, where concrete turns to rubble and burst drains turn rubble to mud. It's a heavy-metal kitchenware delight, where, at the start of the street, a hundred shops and stores offer gleaming pots, pans, stoves, bowls and shiny steel utensils. A thousand meals yet to be prepared throughout the kitchens of Chennai with equipment bought on this street. A million bellies yet to be filled with idli, dosa and sambar, the holy trinity of Tamil culinary delight.

Guarded by temple priests and touched by believers who pass, an eternal flame rages in front of Shiva's metal trident outside a Hindu temple. It's dusk and Marwari moneylenders' daughters hit the throttle and blaze into the night and possibly into your heart. Flames of passion down on Mint Street. Beauty exists not only inside a Hindu temple but also on the seat of a Hero Honda.

Is this just another Indian street where cows compete with vegetable stalls, where people jostle with vehicles, where men haul heavy loads for quenching the insatiable needs of the masses? Nothing could be further from the truth. Mint Street may well be a hot and bothered affair and might fray the nerves, but it's Chennai's special street. It's the world in one place.

That may be a little bit of an exaggeration. More apt to state that it's where different parts of India have come together to produce a uniquely Tamilian cocktail with intriguing Gujarati and Rajasthani aftertastes.

Ram Ram Rajasthan, good-day Gujarat. Down on Mint Street, hear the call of Gujarat, feel the heat of Rajasthan. The area around Mint Street is Rajasthan by the sea, Gujarat on the Coromandel Coast. It's where Marwaris (an ethnic group from those two states), many of them moneylenders and businessmen, migrated to during the 20th century and before. It's where the yellow veil of the desert state still covers faces, still hangs head to toe on slender figures that glide at dusk. Indeed, Sowcarpet derives its name from Sahukar — money lender in Hindi.

It's not just old women who you'll see walking about in colourful, traditional north Rajasthani and Gujarati clothing and jewellery here. Slender women with faces fully veiled and wearing lehenga choli walk past in groups with babies perched on hips. Out of Tamil Nadu and into the heart of what could appear to be some of the most tradition-bound neighbourhoods of Jodhpur or Bhuj within just a few minutes' walk of Chennai's main railway station. Even many of the store signs and name boards are in Hindi or Gujarati scripts.

As an aside, it is apparent that women's Rajasthani costumes resemble aspects of clothing worn by the Romani or Roma people of Europe (still referred to as 'gypsies' by some). That's because the Roma originally came from the Indian subcontinent, especially modern-day Rajasthan. The Roma are thought to have arrived in Europe during the 13th and 14th centuries. Today, they tend to be concentrated in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Spain and Turkey.

Mint Street is where pedal power meets bullock cart. It's a place where the modern submits to tradition. A girl in jeans accompanies her married sister in saree. Traditional gold jewellery shimmers in brightly lit shop windows and drips on the skin of women who sit in groups on shop floors, where men wheel out cloth from endless rolls for customers' inspection. Rolls of material destined to be draped around bodies then hung over a thousand Sowcarpet balconies above the streets while drying in the sun.

A smiling member of the hijra (third gender) community greets me. A group that has for some time been marginalised in Indian society.

Hijras have a long history in India, with roots tracing back to ancient Hindu mythology and texts. They once held respected positions in royal courts, particularly during the Mughal era. Traditionally, hijras have played important roles in certain religious and life-cycle ceremonies, believed to have the power to bless or curse.

However, British colonial rule dramatically altered their social status, criminalising and stigmatising the community through laws. Today, they often face significant discrimination and economic hardship, and many are forced into begging or sex work due to limited employment opportunities.

But her demeanour might suggest a degree of self-confidence and integration into modern life. It may reflect gradual positive changes in societal attitudes and recent legal recognitions of third gender status in India.

Hijras often adopt feminine dress and mannerisms yet occupy a unique cultural space distinct from both men and women.

And Mint Street continues. Men stand sipping at stalls. The world viewed from over the rim of a plastic cup of scalding chai or coffee. A poor cycle rickshaw man transports a young woman of north Indian ancestry with mobile phone pressed against her veil-secluded head. Dogs take a break between naps in search of a spare bit of rice. Cows munch on vegetation strewn across the street. People stop at stalls of apples, mangoes, aubergines and oranges, all meticulously laid out for public perusal. It's abundance overload on Mint Street.

Perfumes, paper, plates, plastic tubing or intricate henna hand painting done in the street; pay your money, take your choice. 'Shree Ganesh Steel', 'Bharat Steel House' and 'Gents Beauty Parlour'. The mundane practicalities of everyday living next to alluring adornments designed to beautify and attract.

Another person greets me. His forehead marking, a tilak, is associated with Vishnu and serves as a visible symbol of his religious identity and devotion.

The presence of this marking illustrates how religious practices are seamlessly integrated into daily life. The devout individual highlights the connection between tradition and modernity in India today. It indicates how ancient religious practices continue to thrive alongside the pressures and rhythms of urban life.

Unlike in some Western contexts where religion is often compartmentalised, in India, spiritual practices and symbols frequently permeate public spaces. This man's visible devotion reflects the seamless integration of the sacred and the secular in Indian cultural life.

While the external trappings of society may evolve, core cultural and spiritual values often remain deeply rooted.

An innings already played out, an old man sits and waits on the step of a six-storey apartment block. A hundred different architectural styles, each narrow building separately designed yet attached to one another. A dozen different designs in a single lane, many with intricately carved alcoves and cosy bays, stacked above the chaos of the streets below.

Functional concrete boxes stripped of any beauty or appeal by architects whose motto must have been ‘uglification is us’ stand next to shiny marbled buildings in which each metal-railed balcony, window ledge and carefully designed recess was thought out down to the finest detail. The claustrophobic lanes hemmed in by a never-ending wall of buildings winding their way into the distance. Ugliness and beauty, paradox and jumble.

A woman holds a child and belongs to a group of women with children, who are most likely members of her extended family. The red coloured garment she wears is deeply significant in Hindu culture, representing auspiciousness, fertility and feminine power and is linked to the goddess Durga. The setting of Mint Street in Sowcarpet, a historically mercantile district, enhances the scene's contrast between a harsh urban setting of noise, traffic congestion and crowds and the intimate act of nurturing a child who seems vulnerable amid the chaos.

The busy street is home to numerous Hindu shrines and temples, reinforcing the cultural backdrop against which personal and communal identities are negotiated. The woman's attire — a traditional saree paired with contemporary accessories like a fashionable handbag and modern watch — illustrates the negotiation of personal identity in today's India.

This blend signifies a dynamic interface between old and new, showcasing how individuals create their personal narratives while maintaining ties to their heritage.



In Hinduism, nurturing children is often equated with divine service, linking everyday acts of care to spiritual practice. This connection emphasises that motherhood transcends mere biological functions; it embodies a sacred duty that aligns with broader religious beliefs.

The scene encapsulates a multifaceted representation of Indian culture where colour symbolism, urban dynamics, personal identity and devotion converge.

Mint Street itself derived its name from having housed the East India Company's mint. These days, many people visit the area to sample the tasty bites on offer, which hail from all over India. Snack on chaat or crispy jalebis. Try out different flavours of kulfis and sample pyaz kachori. Take some raj shri paani poori, sinabhai idlis, aloo sabzi, shahi panner or Kolkata paan. But these are not the only Indian 'reality bites' around here.

Being both residential and commercial, a journey through the wider George Town area may not be to everyone's liking. Stumble into the back streets and tumble into an India of grinding hard work. Dozens of grungy dhabas with workers frenetically boiling, frying, stirring from dawn till dusk, offering carbohydrate, oil-laden fuel for the labouring classes whose high calorie endeavours keep India on the move.

It's an India that never sleeps. It's an India of straw-covered streets and bullock carts, of constant deliveries and heavy loading, of sacks of produce delivered on the sun-beaten bare-backs of the young and the not so young — in some cases, the downright old.

For those used to the genteel side of life in more affluent countries, this 'land that time forgot', this throwback to the pre-industrial era, is something that they only get to know about by reading history books. But it's here and now in the 21st century. It's living India. It's 'modern' India. It's not the India of cyber parks, apps or Twitter. It's the India of unimaginable long hours, energy-sapping labour and tough, sinewy dark-skinned men who've never

had it so bad, who've never experienced life any better and most certainly never will.

It's the India populated by the hundreds of millions that exist on a pittance. It's the kind of thing that the prevailing economic system sucks dry: the cheap buck sweated out of malnourished labour, the years squeezed from life expectancy brought about by hard manual work and the legacy of stunted growth passed on to the offspring of the labouring classes.

India has more than its fair share of children under-five who are severely or moderately underweight and experience moderate to severe stunting. And this even though the country is the world's largest producer of milk, pulses and millets and the second-largest producer of rice, wheat, sugarcane, groundnuts, vegetables, fruit and cotton. Indeed, India fares poorly in world hunger rankings.

Why so? Hunger and malnutrition result from inadequate food distribution, (gender) inequality, poverty and shifting cropping patterns that result in high-calorie, lower nutrient-dense staples. The country continues to export food while millions remain hungry. It's a case of 'scarcity' amid abundance.

Moreover, rice and wheat, which meet over 50 per cent of the daily energy requirements of people in India, have lost up to 45 per cent of their food value in the past 50 years or so. The concentration of essential nutrients like zinc and iron has decreased by 33 per cent and 27 per cent in rice and by 30 per cent and 19 per cent in wheat, respectively.

Again, why so? Partly because modern-bred cultivars of rice and wheat are less efficient in sequestering zinc and iron, regardless of their abundance in soils. In effect, plants have lost their capacity to take up nutrients from the soil. As a result, across the world, not just in India, two billion people now experience micronutrient deficiencies.

With each sunrise, the story in Sowcarpet continues. Women with hand-held brushes bend over and sweep dirt into the air. Back-street dairy owners release cows into the streets. And people wait. The destitute wait for alms outside the area's many temples. Men squat and wait for a frenzied day of shifting and loading to begin. Others wait too — men who have more than their muscle power for sale.

They are artisans whose tools — trowels, hammers, chisels and various other implements — are displayed on the ground in front of them. Skills for hire. The dignity of labour, no matter how low paid it may be.

Bells chime and semi-naked, soft-bodied temple priests brush past proud-looking men honed from granite. They have already started their day's toil of lifting and carrying bricks. A hard day ahead. Nearby, a mother and her two kids still fast asleep are lying on the solid wooden planks of a bicycle cart. No mattress or sheets. A hard night behind.

In the meantime, a hundred diesel powered generators along Mint Street and beyond power up to spew out their pollutants for the duration of the latest power cut (euphemistically called 'load shedding').

For many who visit this area of Chennai, the place is just too crowded and congested. But they visit this area of the city for dried fruits, spices and grains. They come for textiles and sarees. They come for gleaming metallic kitchenware, plastic products, fashion jewellery, machine tools, electronic items, stationery and various general products at low cost.

The area is not really a place to hang out. It's a fast and furious world of hard work, cow mess, mud, indigestion and sensory overload. Many from more affluent parts of the city prefer to visit the AC worlds of Express Mall, City Centre Mall or Spencer Plaza. Perhaps some things are better out of sight — out of mind.

In Sowcarpet, things can be a little too hot.



Chapter 5

Where Cows and Princesses Glide Through Mud

Look up but certainly look down as well. Just watch your step. There are a million stones to negotiate and a thousand pieces of loose concrete. There's the odd discarded sandal and the numerous potholes. There are countless strands of old plastic that were used for strapping boxes to carts, sacks to trucks or tubes together as they were all transported into, out of or around the area.

There are streams of liquid. Burst drain liquid, dog and cow liquid. Some stale and dried, some still flowing. Negotiate a path around, not through. There are mini mountains of sludge from drains cleared by municipal workers with their metal rods. There are mini mountains of other stuff too. Animal stuff.

Pungent odours burn the back of the throat. Pleasant, softer ones in the air as well. They come from street-side stoves that cook dosas, idlis, sambar and spicy bites for the labouring masses of this area. They also seep from sacks of spices thrown down hard on surfaces outside wholesale traders from carts and trucks. Familiar aromas that you just can't put a name to. And unfamiliar ones that you try to.

Body swerve one way and then the other because there are dozens of accidents waiting to happen down these narrow lanes. Lanes without pavements, lanes without end, lanes without respite from activity and chaos. Within a centimetre of your body and possibly an inch of your life, big brightly painted trucks with 'Blow horn at night' painted on the rear and hand-drawn pictures of frightening demons and reassuring gods growl past.

Cyclists, cycle rickshaws, overloaded cycle carts packed high with boxes or six-metre-long tubes and men with huge, heavy sacks also rush by. They all have right of way.

Boxes containing metal pressure valves, fluorescent light tubes, surgical appliances, herbal medicines and TVs. Sacks containing flour, rice, spices and produce. Tubing made of plastic or metal. Tubing for underground cables, electrical machinery and all manner of components and parts for ships, factories and houses. Think of anything that humanity could and does use. Then open your eyes here and see, hear, feel, taste or smell it.

‘Shree Grinders’, ‘Lakshmi buildings’, ‘Ganesh Traders’. The names of gods or symbols denoting greatness adorn the signage in this area. This area of mundane, earthly, back-breaking endeavour, which some might think God forsook long ago. This area of thousands of one-room workshops and trading offices and wholesale merchants, all milling, grinding, beating, buying, selling, importing and exporting.

Textiles wrapped around rolls. Sheets of plastic rolled around tubes. Whole families clung around seats of mopeds. Five to a seat.

Sacks of garlic or apples lifted on the back from trucks or cycle carts into premises. Sacks of spices on the hardened dark-skinned backs of tough-looking men. No fork-lift trucks, no other lifting machinery, no footwear, no health or safety. Just taught bare bodies with lungis wrapped around the lower half. No protruding bellies or chubby faces from over-indulging in idlis, dosas or rice meals either. These men are not from middle-class, increasingly obese India.

Hundreds of bags of chilli rest on the floor outside wholesalers, emblematic of Chennai’s role as a major spice trading hub. Spices have been a cornerstone of South Indian commerce for centuries, and Chennai, with its strategic port location, has long been a key player in this trade.

The prominence of chilli highlights its significance in South Indian cuisine and culture. While modern supermarkets and online platforms are changing consumer habits, wholesale markets like those in George Town continue to serve an essential function in the supply chain.

A stray dog wanders through the jungle of legs. Another mongrel with an ear half missing munches on what must be a delectable piece of garbage.

And two minutes' walk away, a stone's throw from all the commerce, hauling, loading and grind, small kids on Mint Street with smiling faces and satchels make their way from school. Old men beaten down by the years hobble back into dark hallways and wait to die another day.

A sadhu, dressed in traditional saffron attire, walks past a shop. He represents India's ancient spiritual traditions. Sadhus are ascetics who have renounced worldly possessions and pleasures in pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Their presence in urban settings, in this case, seeking alms from businesses, connects modern city life to age-old religious customs.

His presence is a visual commentary on the tensions and contradictions in Indian society. It highlights the coexistence of deep-rooted spiritual traditions with the rapid embrace of global consumer culture, particularly in cities like Chennai. Ancient practices continue to find a place in today's urban landscape: tradition and modernity, spirituality and materialism, coexist in sometimes uneasy but dynamic ways.

Meanwhile, veils are pulled over heads and plastic bags containing fabrics from 'Fancy Saree Fashion House' dangle from arms. Bejewelled princesses don't just exist in fairy tales. They glide through mud while talking on cell phones down the narrow alleys off Mint Street. And the bag does not lie — the contents will almost certainly be 'fancy'. The colours and patterns are much more eye-catching, daring and flamboyant around here than elsewhere in Chennai.

Neighbourhood centres, marriage halls and Jain and Hindu temples. Apartment blocks, back-lane schools and small hospitals. Sowcarpet isn't just an area of commerce and hard labour, it's also an area of community... many communities from different regions of India, of different faiths of different appearances, of different wealth brackets.

This is an area of migrants. Migrants who originally rented rooms from local Tamil people during the last century and beyond. Many locals eventually sold up and moved out completely to reside elsewhere.

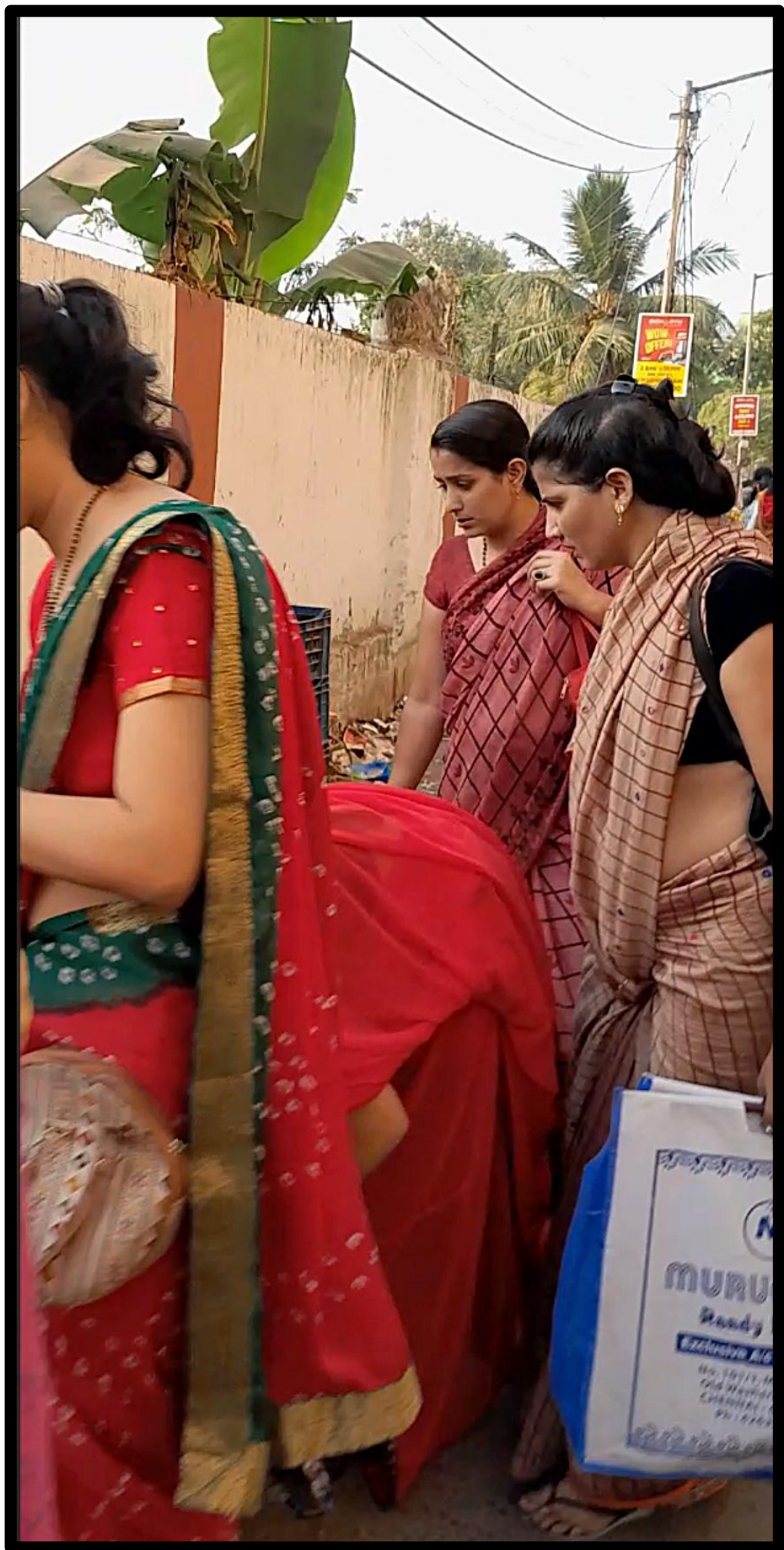
In what is possibly the most overcrowded part of Chennai, there are cows, dogs, garbage in the street and, of course, people. They reside in a sea of small apartment blocks, which seem to go on never- ending into the distance, whichever way you look. They sprawled sideways and upwards to accommodate migrants from North India, many of whom had larger families than the original Tamil inhabitants of the area. The fact that their neighbours from towns and villages up in Gujarat, Rajasthan and elsewhere often followed didn't help matters.

Sowcarpet loosely translates as moneylender or pawnbroker. Such businesspeople formed part of the North Indian population who came here. But appearances can be deceptive: there is wealth in this area.

Moneylenders do not remain poor. Neither do wholesale traders or the many jewellers in the area. The quality of some of the apartment blocks, the facades at least, indicate a certain degree of wealth remains here. The well-off continue to reside in these types of areas throughout India because they rely on the local community, its social capital and the associated networks to do business, to gain an edge on the competition.

Back in the 1700s Telegu speaking people from southern India migrated to Mint Street. People from Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other states eventually came too. This eclectic mix has helped make Sowcarpet what

it is today. In some respects, it has helped it to keep ahead of the game. Not in terms of decent urban planning, prettiness or cleanliness, but certainly in terms of heart, soul and vibrancy.



Chapter 6

Keeping it Clean on Mint Street

A brush made from twigs sweeps dust. Its owner, an old woman in rags, performs the sweeping-street-dust-into-the-air ritual twice daily. At least until the dust settles again, she's keeping it clean on Mint Street.

A cow munches on discarded vegetation. It's also keeping it clean while standing in its or some other animal's stale urine.

Holy cow? Not really: just thrown into the street by some back-street dairy owner for the day to fend for itself and whacked on the back with a piece of wood if it pokes its snout into places it should not... like the juicy delights of a fruit vendor's street cart.

A boy negotiates his way past a couple of stray dogs that are also rummaging through the rubbish. An old man at the side of the street rubs his face against another stray dog while stroking its cheeks in a touching show of affection. Dog lovers of the world unite. These street dogs have it tough and don't really belong to anyone, but on seeing such a scene, they kind of belong to someone... maybe to everyone. People tend to look out for them, from pup to death's door.

On the other side of the street, an attractive young woman with calf length jeans, sandals and loose chiffon top, talks to a friend in a doorway while twirling her long black hair between her fingers. An innocent conversation between two Marwari girls.

Through the old woman's dust, three silhouettes approach; ghostly figures, lost in the haze. For a fleeting moment, its desert sand, not dust. The figures come into view. Their Rajasthan ancestry given away by their full-

body yellow veils draped over head, cascading almost to the ground. Their jingle jangle ankle jewellery denotes their presence. They glide by.

The twirling-her-fingers-through-the-hair woman pays no attention to them, nor they to her.

The beauty of the scene suddenly destroyed.

A man rasps, brings up garbage from his throat and snorts its contents onto the floor via a designated nostril, with finger squeezing the other shut. A dog sniffs it and walks off. A good reason why face to face shows of affection with Indian street dogs are not really recommended.

A cycle rickshaw wallah rings his bell as he veers his wooden vehicle over to one side to avoid a pothole. You walk in the road. There are no pavements. Pedestrians beware.

Clothing dries on balconies overhead. Kids packed tight into auto- rickshaws head home from school. Early October in Chennai is hot.

Mint Street is even hotter.

Approaching a one-room shop with counter directly on the street –

“Vanakam. Thums up? Glass bottle”, I say, not wanting a large plastic bottle of this soft drink.

Vanakam being one word of Tamil that I know. At one point, my Tamilian vocabulary was up to about 40 words!

Moving back towards the fridge in the dark recesses of his dimly lit shop, the vendor obliges with faint smile.

A flash of blue and yellow breezes out from a dark alleyway a few metres down. A resident of one of the many apartments that make up the compact four-storey block to which this ‘mom and pop’ shop belongs. These small,

one-room neighbourhood retail shops are known as kirana stores. They primarily sell groceries and essential household items, making them a staple in local communities for shoppers.

Outside hangs a shell and leaves. They carry deep symbolic meaning rooted in Hindu philosophy and cultural traditions. The conch shell is sacred and associated with Vishnu, the preserver deity. It is used in rituals and symbolises purity and prosperity. A lime hangs above the shell, accompanied by green chillis to protect against negative energies. They are also associated with prosperity and abundance.

The secular and the sacred are deeply intertwined. Sowcarpet is home to many wholesalers selling agricultural produce. Hindu deities can be seen on sacks of rice, reflecting the deep integration of religion and spirituality in daily life. This practice stems from the belief that the divine is present in all aspects of life.

Many Hindu deities represent specific virtues or qualities. For example, Ganesha is often seen on doorways or vehicles, symbolising the removal of obstacles and new beginnings. Lakshmi, frequently depicted in shops, represents wealth and prosperity. By including these deities on relevant items, people invoke their blessings in daily activities.

In India, religious symbols can act as markers of cultural identity. Featuring Hindu deities on everyday items reinforces cultural connections and traditions, even in modern contexts. Additionally, these deities are often depicted in vibrant, intricate artistic styles that add aesthetic value to everyday objects, blending functionality with cultural artistry.

Hinduism bridges the gap between the sacred and the mundane in a uniquely Indian way.

But not everything is 'artistic' or pleasing'. The neighbourhood comprises compact apartment blocks: hundreds, if not thousands of them. Bland

concrete-box India. The concrete-box area of Chennai's original centre, George Town, next to the port. A city of 10 million. Low-rise sprawl that just keeps on sprawling.

The blue-and-yellow figure stops at the shop, and, in Tamil, she orders some washing powder. She must be no more than 26. Her watery cow eyes glisten. The only part of her body exposed is her pale-skinned face and a slightly hairy braceleted arm that protrudes from her tightly wrapped around saree.

Not for standing in the doorway while twirling hair through the fingers this woman. This is a woman under wraps. In every sense of the word. A housewife. A mother. A washer of clothes, a doer of household chores.

She leaves with packet in hand. She also glides. She also jingle- jangles. Breezing back into an alleyway of untold secrets, mystery and seclusion, she will faithfully clean whiter than white for the rest of her life because her type does. Her type must.

She's also keeping it clean on Mint Street.



Chapter 7

Immunity in George Town

Hack, slit, slice. Butchery in George Town. Peeled pink goat carcasses in fly-ridden, one-room shops. Tethered animals wait their fate outside on the street. Some 40 half-dead chickens tied upside down by legs hanging from bicycle handlebars have just arrived. Their destiny set as well.

Mend, sew and stitch. Men squat by wooden carts at the roadside repairing old agricultural produce sacks for reuse. Their former contents now spread out on the floor on carts or in doorways. Brightly coloured tomatoes piled high. Stacks of ladyfinger. Rich green chillies. Red peppers, green peppers, onions, aubergines, pods, peas, carrots and potato. You name it, it's here. Potpourri of visual delight.

Look, check, haggle. Women with expert eyes and stiff plastic shopping bags eke out the best bargains. Newly married daughters- in-law learn the tricks of the veg-buying trade. Demure, almost sad eyed. They mingle with massive cows with even sadder, more demure eyes. They munch on discarded leaves and produce that didn't measure up. Even India's vegetarian stray dogs get in on the act.

Proud, crying, still. Huge light-coloured bullocks proudly wait. Wait for men to offload goods from carts these animals hauled through choking, stinking traffic for miles. Massive upright horns still painted from the recent Pongal festival (harvest celebration), they chew silently on straw with teardrop eye residue staining their faces.

Brush, glide, slide. Women float. Veils billow. Smooth exposed midriffs slide by. Half-bare shoulders brush past. Traditional, flesh- revealing sarees tightly wrapped around slim bodies and not so slim bodies. Under wraps in

yellow Rajasthani veils and other paraphernalia worn a dozen different ways according to ancestry, community and how things are done in Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Bihar or whichever region people came from to settle here in the melting pot of George Town.

The urban fashion landscape for women is being homogenised by western clothing, kurtas and kameez in India's big cities. But in the Sowcarpet area of George Town, many women from different parts of India are still identified by region according to their clothing.

Nose studs and earrings glisten. Bullock bell horns jangle. Ankle bracelets jingle. Women slide through the crowds of working men, cockerels, cows, cycle rickshaws and dogs.

Black sludge and white. Boys in pristine-white uniforms play. A fee-paying Christian 'Don Bosco' school for parents with money. A white school building with spacious, neat yard.

Directly outside on the street, an ugly mess of one room hutments. Corrugated metal. Thin hardboard partitions thrown together for walls. Plastic sheeting for roofs tied with rope onto railings.

Dusty kids with matted hair. Cow shit and flies. Dog piss and stench. Large overflowing municipal rubbish bins. Black sludge dredged up from underground sewers. Emaciated grey-haired women lie on floor dressed in rags.

Young hutment-dwelling women yell at their squealing kids. Coarse, hoarse voices. Earthy women with the grit of the land, the soil of the village engrained in their pores. Sitting outside their dwellings packed with bedding, checking friends' hair for lice, watching the pots and pans boil. Daily rituals. Checking and yelling. Cooking and washing and threading flowers for sale to adorn hair or garland Hindu effigies.

Pump, lift, carry. A hundred plastic pots of water secured from municipal street stanchions for washing clothes and cooking. Open stoves at the roadside lit with wood. Boiling and stirring. Metal pots and pans. Rice, sambar, veg.

A small and grubby local chai shop across the way. Outside, huge wall pictures of Hindu gods look onto the street. Brightly coloured murals with metaphors.

This world of rags and plastic sheeting. This place of dirt and mud. Chennai's poorest. Their kids don't stand a chance. Before leaving the womb, they never did stand a chance. They never will and never shall. It's heartbreak alley. What use soothing wall effigies?

Medicine to dull the pain.

Scrawny husbands pedal cycle rickshaws or obtain sweated labour any which way they can in this area of hauling and carrying, shifting and mending.

The underemployed. The poverty and filth.

Walk on by. A self-conscious fleeting glimpse cast. Then carry on. Move on with your school day. Your pristine-white, comfortable day. It all exists side by side. No one appears culpable. Immunity and squalor.

Daylight draws to a close. The imperious domes of the Victorian-era Madras High Court cast long shadows over the neighbourhood.

There's no justice here. There never has been.



Chapter 8

A New Broom Sweeps Clean

All over India, from cities to towns and villages, women bend over in the early-morning haze to sweep away dust, a ritual cleansing to mark the day ahead. Some say the broom embodies the goddess of wealth, Lakshmi, and helps bring in wealth by removing dirt and dust.

Whether cleaning a courtyard, the entrance to a dwelling, a patch of road or pathway, sweeping is usually performed by women. The broom has a relatively short handle with long materials strapped to it. These might be twigs, various types of grass or synthetic fibre. But given the length of the handle, they all require its user to bend over towards the floor to use.

Different brushes are used for different purposes. It always struck me as a bit strange — being an outsider — that hotel staff would use a broom with water to clean a bathroom. No mop and bucket or squeezable foam on a stick. But for sweeping fluids, a broom with thicker and stronger strands gets the job done.

It's about a 35-minute walk to the gym from my current residence. Along the way, it is striking that filth, mud, cow dung, human and animal fluids and rubble are just taken for granted. Having to negotiate this obstacle course can be quite a challenge. Yet, turn a corner and there might be someone sweeping away, especially at the start of the day. She will be ensuring that not one speck of dust will remain in a chosen patch.

But the dust-free area will not remain dust free for long. A gust of wind might ensure its return, traffic pollution will take its toll, and people will walk it back in. Displacing dust from one area to another can only be a

temporary solution in India, possibly one of the dustiest countries on the planet.

Getting to the gym from my place is a test of resolve. Being alert to the guided missiles coming at you from all directions can be mentally draining. Even walking along a two-way traffic system with a dividing wall down the middle of the road is no guarantee of safety as scooters and carts travel in the wrong direction.

And after months of ongoing repairs to underground cables and pipes, the side of the road is finally concreted over. A pavement has almost been laid and looks impressive. But do not expect to be able to actually walk on it once finished.

It will soon be occupied by cages with live chickens waiting their fate, sacks containing produce, heavy gas cannisters, sugar cane crushers, advertising boards and families laying their heads to rest. And it will not be long before the next round of digging and repairs takes place. With its creaking infrastructure, much of urban India can at times resemble a permanent building site.

Little wonder that walking in the road among chaotic traffic is common in India's towns and cities.

The solution today is to veer off the main road and head into one of the narrow lanes that will eventually get me to where I want to be. Shiva, Ganesh, Vishnu, Krishna and other gods peer out from the various temples and shrines that watch over the neighbourhood.

These icons of worship stand in sharp contrast to the surrounding utilitarian architecture. The temples and streetside shrines, with their ornate carvings and bright hues, serve as a testament to traditional Tamil architecture and religious practices, while the apartments reflect a more contemporary, practical approach to urban living.

This juxtaposition not only emphasises the coexistence of old and new but also underscores the significance of spirituality in daily life, even in a densely populated urban environment.

Temple architecture in Tamil Nadu is a remarkable testament to the region's rich cultural heritage and artistic brilliance, featuring around 33,000 ancient temples that date back over two millennia. Characterised by the Dravidian style, larger temples showcase distinctive elements such as towering gopurams (gateway towers), pyramid-shaped vimanas (sanctum towers), intricately sculpted pillared mandapas (halls) and sacred tanks that symbolise purification.

Each temple serves as a vibrant centre of worship and community life, reflecting the spiritual devotion of the Tamil people.

And as I make my way to my destination, around each corner, a new story, a new scene; neighbourhoods within neighbourhoods glued together by extended families and perhaps a kind of obliged neighbourliness — living this close together, you are forced to get along.

The sense of community is tangible, somewhat reminiscent of the now long-gone neighbourhoods in England where, there too, a sense of tradition and togetherness was pervasive. But in the UK, some warped notion of 'progress' and modernity was embraced.

The old was discarded for the new. Profiteering developers and highly paid architects with their pie-eyed dreams were to create the brave new future.

Britain was once a place where a pub existed on every street corner and a church on every other. People now believe in individualism, not community, in the national lottery, not other-worldly salvation, in shopping, not God.

The plight of the traditional pub mirrors that of hollowed out British society. Many of the churches are now empty shells, but the pub has been transformed into the modern theme bar, the 'theme' sometimes being an

empty version of the very tradition that was destroyed under the banner of ‘progress’.

There is huge profit in nostalgia, even if the whole thing is a massive con-trick. People now drink themselves senseless at the trough of make-belief sentimentality — of how they think things used to be. But it is not how it really used to be; it is how it is now — a self-conscious theme world that parodies the past dreamt up by advertising executives and consumer trend analysts.

A cynically manufactured reality, which quenches the thirst for ‘community lost’ and tradition.

It is something writer Paul Kingsnorth wrote on some years back in his book *Real England: The Battle Against the Bland*. The real pubs, the country hedgerows and affordable housing, the individuality and character of many a town has been lost forever. A tale of corporate greed and clamour for thicker, faster income streams has resulted in old England disappearing under what one perceptive online book reviewer calls a “Starbucked, Wetherspooned, Executive Living Spaced avalanche”.

Homogenised culture, homogenised outlooks. Change is a constant but too often is about making someone somewhere more money as quickly as possible.

Apparently, this is progress. A new broom sweeps clean. But does it?

Meanwhile, a man pulls a cycle cart stacked high with neatly bundled coir through the streets. Coir, derived from coconut husks, holds significant cultural and economic importance in South India, particularly in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Its presence in Sowcarpet, known for its wholesale markets, illustrates the enduring connections between rural production and urban distribution

centres, showcasing how traditional products continue to flow into bustling city environments.

The act of pulling a heavily loaded cart highlights the persistence of manual labour in India's urban economies. It serves as a reminder that while some areas of the city embrace technological advancements, others remain reliant on labour-intensive methods that have been part of the fabric of Indian society for generations.

Moreover, such workers often operate without formal contracts or social security but play a crucial role in supply chains while remaining largely invisible in official economic statistics.

The sight of coir being transported through Sowcarpet not only reflects economic activity but also cultural continuity.

I arrive at the gym. A small, gloomy entrance and up three flights of stone stairs. And then, inside this dimly lit, uninviting building I arrive at the shoe rack. No outdoor shoes allowed in the gym. Either wear 'gym footwear' or train in bare feet. I opt for the latter. It's easier than carrying a spare pair.

Once inside, it is relatively modern by Indian standards. A big improvement on the entrance and stairwell. The place might be fairly upmarket but is still very 'Indian'. Most of the lights are deliberately switched off, leaving you to train in semi-darkness.

Even though this gym could be bright and uplifting, it is not.

At least they have sufficient fans, but these too tend to be switched off. If requested, the overhead fan where you happen to be training will be switched on. I've trained in probably 70 gyms all over India. Fans are usually switched off even though the locals are dripping. They inform me that this is good because it builds stamina. I never thought of dehydration that way.

I ask a fellow trainer whether the gym is open on Saturdays. It is, but he tells me not to bother — there will be a hundred-plus people present. I can imagine. I have experienced it, which is why these days I seek out those places that are open when everyone is busy working.

Back in the 1990s, I went to a gym in Bhopal. A cavernous place packed with late teens all working out on substandard equipment. A gym for the ‘common man’.

As I performed my first exercise, I could see everyone gathering. They formed a circle and watched my every move. The attention persisted for the next hour — subjected to questions about where I live, whether I am married, what my job is, my age and so on. Aside from that, it was near impossible to gain access to any equipment given the crowd in there.

After that experience and many others like it, I learnt to avoid training at peak times.

However, there is one thing you cannot avoid. Training during off- peak is when the ‘cleaning’ is done. And that means — the woman with the broom!

No matter what time I go, mid-morning or mid-afternoon, she is sweeping dust into the air. Not good to be breathing in when training. And when she is about, the fan is switched off, so you are gasping, sweating and taking in dust.

But the cleaning — or displacing dust from one area to another — must be done. Actual dust removal depends on how much you can carry out of the place — in your lungs. That’s genuine dust removal for you! I guess that, after all, a new broom does sweep clean. Kind of.



Chapter 9

Funeral in Triplicane

Today in Chennai, there was a dead-end journey. A deafening firecracker was set off by a gathering of men at the head of a funeral procession. Stray dogs flinched; onlookers cowered. Shutters were hastily pulled down. The raucous entourage made its way along the street in Triplicane. Cows scattered, dust swirled, and the afternoon humidity made for uncomfortable viewing.

Cheap alcohol swilled from small glass bottles could not disguise the poverty on show. It was etched in the men's faces, played out in their mannerisms as they danced and given away by their ragged clothing. This large, noisy crowd accompanied the vehicle carrying the flower- adorned body to commemorate a life lived, a passing over. A celebration of living and dying in a country drenched in religion, obsessed with ritual and defined by rigid social stratification.

The booze-fuelled dancing of the men was imbued with certain desperation. The poor always celebrate with a harder edge. They acted as if they controlled the street, as if they ruled the world for the day. They don't. And they never will.

They no doubt inhabited a similar neighbourhood to the one they danced through, with its filthy, sweatbox dhabas, grimy hardware stores, world-weary faces and vegetable stalls. Young children clung to their mothers' shoulders, perched side saddle on saree-covered hips. The choking stench of animal waste and urine permeated the humid atmosphere. Cows munched on the stinking garbage overflowing from the large plastic bins. It's sometimes easier to look away.

This is modern India. It's here and now. But it's not the 'modern' India so often celebrated by the media. That's an India of steel and glass cyber parks, Mumbai skyscrapers and the affluent who also act as if they control the world. But they actually do. And their type possibly always will.

It's a modern India inhabited by a minority. A privileged minority, whose reservation quota is never questioned, is barely acknowledged. By accident of birth, whether through class or caste, or a combination of both, its members were always in prime position to take advantage of the privileges afforded by background in the brave new world of economic banditry called neo-liberalism.

That's the lie of meritocracy for you in a heavily stratified society skewed either in your favour or against you long before you ever leave the womb. It's a hard lesson that those dusty, crying kids who clung to their mothers' hips will soon learn. Their tears came fast and furious in the afternoon heat and will probably do so throughout life. It's a tough lesson that the hardened men at the front of the funeral procession learned long ago.

They may well be poor, but they are every bit as part of today's 'modern' India as those whose lives revolve around the SENSEX, international vacations or business trips and luxury homes. Those two sections of India may be worlds apart, but they inhabit the same land mass, with one living off the cheap labour of the other.

From the building sites to the farms, the scrawny bodies of the disadvantaged and exploited provide the sweated labour for today's affluent India that wallows in high-rise AC penthouses and is increasingly marked by obesity and other 'rich man's' nutrition-related diseases — living off the fat of the land, quite literally.

After the procession had made its way through the area, the dogs and cows once again meandered freely, and women began where they had left off by shopping for vegetables. And you can bet your bottom rupee that it was

spiralling food inflation that was dominating their thinking. Making ends meet is the be all and end all around here.

Other concerns dominate the thinking about ten minutes' walk away in the latest shopping mall to have suddenly sprung up, where the price of designer jeans or sportswear are the burning priority. Less than a kilometre from the stifling, vegetation-strewn locality, the international brands have arrived, adorning the large glass frontages of the latest temple of consumerism. This is not a world of lungis, steaming chai and steaming filth or of undernourished parents with their hungry kids.

This is the world of Lacoste, Nike and Baristo. This is the world where a cup of coffee can cost the best part of a daily wage for most in this country. This is a world of acquisitive materialism, conspicuous consumption and huge four-wheel drive vehicles. It's the modern India lying next door to the other modern India whose inhabitants will never visit or step foot inside, unless it's to collect plastic bottles in a sack carried on back or to wipe clean the hallowed floors dirtied by the designer boots of the privileged.

Poor, thin women worked each day till they dropped to help build this mall and hundreds like it. Their babies played in the dirt nearby. They built it for privileged, well-nourished women whose servants will mind their kids as they adhere to the shop-till-you-drop dogma of modern advertising. Shopping is freedom, so the mantra goes. I don't see much freedom.

While one part of India remains trapped by poverty and disadvantage, another part has bought into the filthy veneration of money and narcissism — a power play that is concerned with redefining who people are and what India should be about — a consumerism and a neo-liberalism that is divisive and, ultimately, unsustainable.

A dead-end journey.



Chapter 10

Splashes in the Spill

Drip and drip again. It's a walk through Triplicane. It's a walk through the Triplicane and Royapettah areas of Chennai in July. It's hot here. It's always hot here. Watch your back. Watch your front. And by the way, watch your side as well. Those mopeds, those scooters, those autos, those guided missiles from all directions. Around here, you walk in the road. Around here, city planners didn't plan for much.

A rush past half a dozen dimly lit pharmacy shops stacked to the rafters with boxes, bottles and more boxes. A rush past a dozen tiny one-room eateries; non-veg, veg, wooden benches, plastic chairs, metal jugs of water on tables and metal mug waiting to be filled. A rush past street side shrines — tridents, Shivas, Nandis, Ganeshes, lingams. Smell the incense, feel the burn, sense the back streets of Triplicane.

It's dusk. It's dusk when each minutia of life, each nuance, becomes more pronounced, more noticeable, in the neon-polluted haze. When traffic roars and darkness gathers. When anticipation prevails. When the aroma of freshly cooked food hangs in the air and women shop and cows munch. When dhabas bustle and chai shops steam. When firecrackers explode and a thousand vehicle horns blast. And through the choking traffic fumes, seated at the roadside, women sell bright yellow marigolds and sweet-smelling jasmine.

A sharp left and off into the narrow lanes. Boys play cricket, children fly kites from rooftops. And dogs come to life after a hard day's sleep in the shade. Intricately drawn kolams on the floor at the entrances to homes fade in the dark. Where art meets ritual, where community meets tradition, where the

women who drew them assert their presence. Both young and old stop to offer a prayer at a small shrine, and a child says “hi” and continues with his game.

Look from a distance and see the cityscape. The occasional high-rise jostles for space among a million concrete-box buildings that spill across the landscape. Triplicane and Royapettah. Splashes in the spill.

The subtle shades of the night. The garish billboards advertising the latest blockbuster. The moustachioed handsome hero of the Tamil movie variety towers tall above the traffic. The hero, who dishes out and is sometimes the recipient of a form of slapstick violence that never really bruises, never really cuts and never really hurts. In make-believe movieland, the pain is always dulled. Opium for the masses.

And on the corner, by the cracked concrete entrances to the subways that traverse Anna Salai, the main thoroughfare, a bunch of cycle carts parked up. And a bunch of street stalls beckon. Frying, cooking, heating in the roasting night. A quick bite of dosa held in hand, a mouthful of rice shovelled with fingers. Street food served on the street; fast food eaten fast. It's the India of roadside stoves, pots and pans. It's the neighbourhood India of the common man, for the common man. It's community.

It's the type of small-scale enterprise India that many a politician would readily wrench from neighbourhoods in return for a pocket full of Walmart gold. India's education system, healthcare system, infrastructure and welfare system has already been sacrificed for many a burgeoning Swiss bank account.

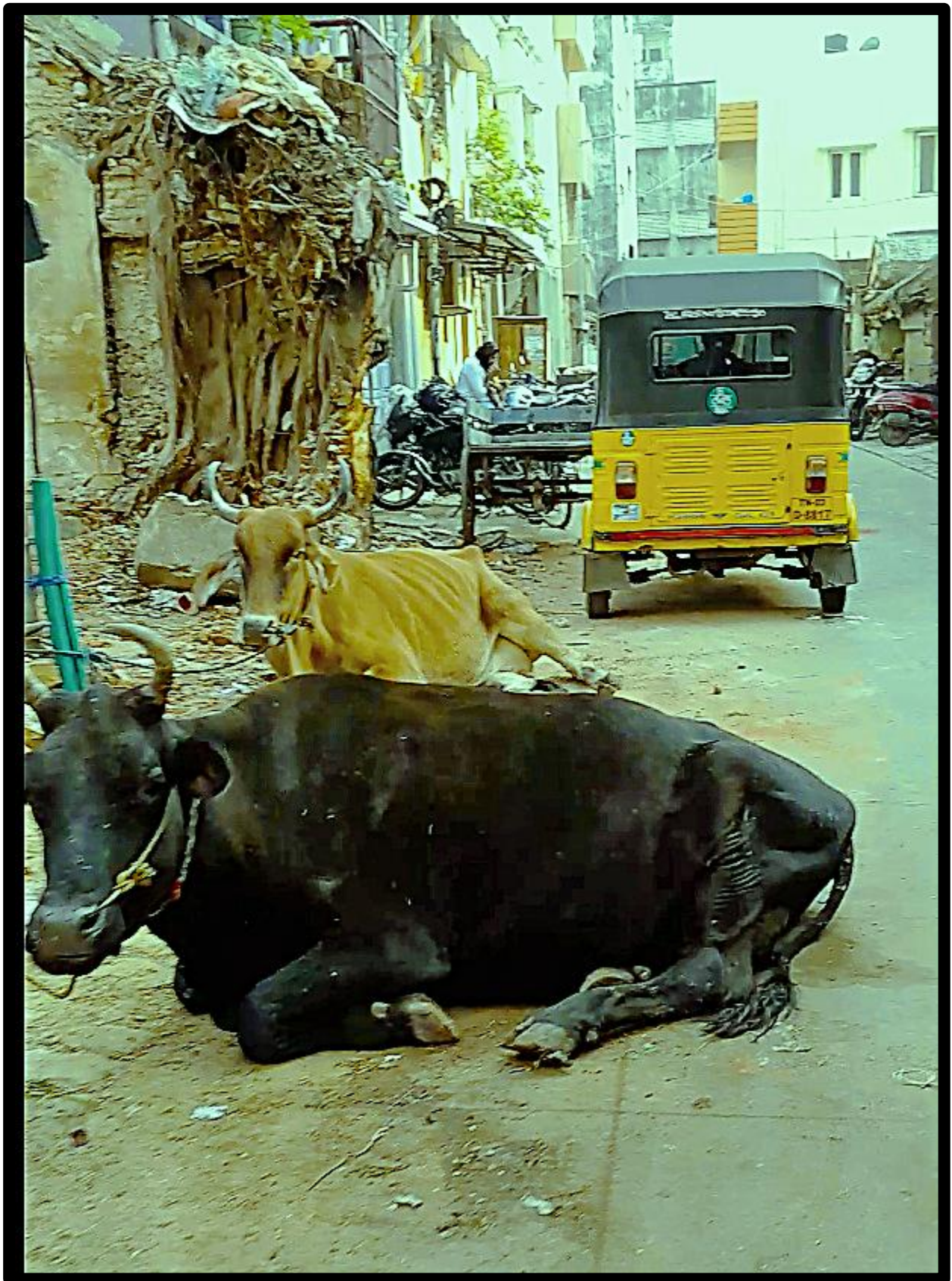
Why not the rest of India too? It's called accumulation by dispossession. It's called stolen wealth. And the process has accelerated since the opening of the economy in '91. The impact is stark, but it is not unique to India. A cheap con-trick sold to the masses on the road to some bogus notion of the 'promised land'; some idiotic secular theology of neo-liberal fast track 'development'.

A promised land of fortune, mansions and lavish living that the tricksters attained years ago — by cartels, force and duplicity masquerading as ‘neo-liberalism’, masquerading as the ‘free’ market. A global market rigged, bought and paid for courtesy of the Rothschilds, Rockefellers, Warburgs or various other billionaire fraudsters before India’s local mom and pop stores were but a twinkle in their parents’ eyes. No, it’s not unique to India. It’s global. Like some of the pesticide-ridden/engineered crops in the fields, or the protruding bellies of the malnourished, it’s not genuine growth, but abnormal swelling. Like the soil sucked dry, people are left to wilt on the vine.

The poverty alleviation rate in India is the same as it was 20 years back. Every second child is underweight and stunted. Eight of India’s states account for more poor people than in the 26 poorest African countries combined (note: this chapter was written some years ago and the data is probably now out of date).

Shopping and consumerism have become the concerns and priorities of India’s misinformed and misled creamy layer. Misinformed by news outlets that pass off infotainment as news. Misinformed by a government that cosies up to western multi-nationals with secretive memorandums of understanding and then proceeds to target some of the poorest people in the country who resist as ‘the enemy within’.

It’s all a bit of a mad dash this. An insane one. A corrupt one. We need to move to a different beat, to travel in a different direction, to make peace with our future.



Chapter 11

Dark Side of the Moon — Sandra's Hand in Time

A random stranger on the street approaches and asks: “You are from that place?”

I’ve been asked this many times over the years in India. The question can also take the form of: “You are from over there?”

‘That place’ and ‘over there’ mean ‘somewhere else’ — another country.

Of course, I always answer “yes”. But it should really be: “No, I’m from here and I’m from now.”

In the now, ‘there’ and ‘then’ are defined by their absence. In a sense, there’s no ‘there’ or ‘then’, whether we are referring to past or future events or places. It is always here, and it’s always now.

Take the mental imprints we carry around with us — memories of the experiences we’ve had. They are always here (if somewhat buried in our minds), engrained, and when we think about them, we always do so now. We define ‘there’ and ‘then’ in terms of a past or future that does not exist. The past and future only exist now — in our mind. The time is always now. And the past is always here.

I’m sitting in a crowded snack joint near Parry’s corner in Chennai, with coffee in a metal mug and a veg cutlet in front of me. Although it is January 2023, I’m also in 1975.

It's all because of some news that was given to me a few months ago. I was told that someone I knew back in 1975 had died. She left this realm in 2008.

She has been lodged somewhere in the back of my mind for all those years, seldom thought about. A fleeting encounter back in 1975 England. But she — Sandra — on this day in Chennai is very much here and now.

She had just been to a Dr Feelgood concert at Mountford Hall at Liverpool University. It was 7 May. An online review of that particular concert says the atmosphere was electric when the band came on stage. The evening was also filled with people with long hair and the tinge of joss sticks and cannabis. I suppose few would associate Dr Feelgood with such a hippie vibe, but after all, it was 1975.

And Sandra was very much 1975. Long black hair, dark eye makeup and a fashion sense that gave a nod to the flowing style of the early 70s. She was 16 but appeared older.

We started talking to her as she got off her bus. I was with a few friends. The bus pulled up to the stop as we were walking past. A pure coincidence — perhaps. She was with a girlfriend and told us where they had been. The conversation continued, and she says that she's also into bands like Black Sabbath. She mentions Pink Floyd and their 1973 album Dark Side of the Moon. I ask whether I could borrow it to listen to. We cross the road and walk to her house a few doors away. She gives me the album.

Meanwhile, in 2023, a woman and her friend sit at my table. They start looking at my coffee. It is black, without milk. Very few people order black coffee in these types of basic eateries in India. It's usually milky and sweet. Her English is even more limited than my Tamil, but I get the point across that it is strong black coffee without sugar. She jokes with her friend and out of curiosity orders the same for herself. It arrives. She takes a sip and they burst into laughter. She finds the taste disgusting.

A light distraction from the 1975 version of myself. I could never have imagined, then, that 48 years later I would be in a cafe thinking back to a time I was on the 56 bus — there, in Liverpool, sitting next to Sandra on our first date. But I'm here, sitting next to two women, in India, in 2023.

The only reason why May 1975 stands out in my mind is because of Sandra. We went on a few dates. At one point, I was in her house listening to a couple of songs from the Physical Graffiti album by Led Zeppelin, released a couple of months earlier. This was a girl with a great taste in music.

She did not belong to what seemed to comprise the majority of teenage girls in the 70s who were into disco music. She had an old head for her young age. I guess that was partly due to her being the youngest of four sisters.

The youngest and the first to go.

After our brief encounter, we went our separate ways in life. One a perennial nomad who has never been able to settle. The other seemingly settled, with a good life in middle-class suburbia. On the surface, I would have had my money on that hippie-looking 70s girl to be the nomad. One of the tracks she played to me on the Physical Graffiti album was aptly called 'The Rover'. But I guess deep down she wanted what most people want — after the joss sticks and smell of cannabis have faded along with the excitement and feelgood of teenage kicks — stability and security.

I had not thought too much about her over the years. But the knowledge of her death brought her back into focus. Is it because of the manner in which she died (cancer)? The fact that she passed away too soon? Or is it because I regret being too flawed at that time to hold on to her for longer? Maybe all those things. Plus a nostalgic depression brought on by the nicer memories of a long-lost youth.

I recently listened to the track called 'Time' from Sandra's Dark Side of the Moon album:

“You are young and life is long and there is time to kill today
And then one day you find ten years have got behind you”

It's not ten years. It's now many decades later, looking back to when youth reigned, we killed time and our lives ahead did indeed appear long. Some say it's best to leave the past where it belongs — back 'there'. But how's that possible? It's always 'here'.

Regardless of our physical location, it is where many of us feel 'at home'.

In my mind's eye, I see Sandra as she was — frozen in time in 1975 in the here and now world of memories, coffee and spicy veg cutlets on the Coromandel coast. The embodiment of a blossoming youth characterised by hope, aspiration and a certain innocence. An essence that does not last because, once fully blossomed, it matures and becomes something different.

Her presence lingers. She is here. A flame that flickers in the many minds of those who knew her. Perhaps she is now also part of something majestic in the hereafter. I hope so. She entered the world and experienced life as Sandra, an energy that touched the lives of others. She made life better.

Not long after returning to the UK, I visited her grave on the outskirts of the city. A long trek on a hot summer's day. A bunch of flowers, now dead, had been placed at the graveside some months earlier. The surroundings verdant and in full bloom, where des-res housing meets rural serenity. Coffee in a grubby sweatbox eatery in Chennai a long way away. Some 5,000 miles away in 'that place'. As far away in the distance as 1975. But always here, always now.

However, in this version of 'now', the fleeting physical one in front of me, I was present in the past — I was 'home'. I tried, without success, to wipe off some encrusted bird excrement from the headstone with my hand and placed a couple of empty dislodged memorial vase holders back into position. In the leafy silence, I looked at Sandra's photo on the headstone and wondered

whether she would have still remembered me... but none of that matters any more.



Chapter 12

I'm Mandy — Fly Me!

This is a strange place. It's a place where Chicago meets Karachi, where Moscow meets Madrid. It's a place where the living dead congregate. Blurry eyed, stomachs still circling high above the ground and minds lost somewhere over the ocean. A thousand faces disoriented and tired. Welcome to the transit lounge of Dubai International Airport.

I lost my mind. Some might say I lost it years ago. And they may be right. But on this occasion, I lost it somewhere over the Indian Ocean in an Airbus jet. No doubt It will catch up once the jet lag dissipates in a few days from now. My belly still churns in the turbulent atmosphere some miles above Dubai airport, which we circled around for an eternity because of the heavy traffic landing and taking off.

An early morning take-off out of Chennai's Anna International Airport already ensured one sleepless night. Now stuck inside another airport for the next six hours in what is laughably called 'transit' yet going nowhere fast. From Madras to Marrakesh via Dubai and Casablanca with a dozen cups of coffee and countless meals on trays delivered to my seat courtesy of women in the sky with painted on smiles and airline uniforms.

From a world of sambar idli, dosas and rava kesari to a land of olives, tajines and mint tea. From Mint Street in Madras to mint tea in Marrakesh in the blink of an eye. Hardly that fast, but it kind of sounds poetic. And believe it or not, air travel was once actually quite poetic in a period long before crowded skies and 'stacking' and circling high above mega-sized airports became the norm.

In Britain, during the 1970s, there was a TV commercial for a particular airline which zoomed in on the beautiful face of what was called back then an ‘air hostess’ — ‘cabin crew’ in today’s parlance. And as the camera focused on her, she seduced the male viewer with the phrase “I’m Mandy, fly me!”

Commercials may not have been as slick as they are today, but what they lacked in slickness, they more than made up for in impact.

Mandy represented all the beauty, poetry and glamour of air travel in the days before air passengers were scanned, scrutinised, questioned, cattle prodded and virtually criminalised for daring to set foot inside an airport terminal. It was an age before paranoia and wars of terror that are deceptively passed off as wars on terror.

Mandy’s smiling face could even be seen looking down on the public from billboards in many a dull concrete-grey British city. Mandy, the air hostess and temptress of the skies, adding a splash of excitement and colour to the drab urban winters of my youth. As that old song by the group 10cc goes — with her smile as bright as sunshine, she called me through the poster and welcomed me aboard. Where did you go to Mandy?

That song was called “I’m Mandy, fly me”. A great song, but given the ad campaign of the time, they were always going to be on a sure-fire winner with the title alone.

After countless flights, I’ve yet to meet Mandy. That’s just as well because she’d be in her 60s now. Still beautiful, no doubt, but disappointingly not the youthful heartbreaker I remember from my teenage years. But that was being a teenager in the 1970s for you. Indeed, that was the 1970s for you.

It was a much simpler time, an era when the TV viewer might even have thought that the Mandy in the TV commercial really would be waiting to greet them and welcome them aboard their next flight. Life was more uncomplicated. Just three TV channels in Britain, a handful of radio

stations, trade unions against business, the US against the USSR, no internet, jobs for life and a certain structure to living and life. It's all gone.

And somewhere along the line, Mandy and her promises from above went too. As she waved goodbye, we also said farewell to glamour in the skies and on the ground. Airports now resemble giant shopping malls that are cynically laid out in order that the hapless passenger is 'guided' through endless pathways to ensure maximum 'footfall' for the same big-name stores that are to be found in airports from LA to London and beyond.

These days, that's how our stairway to heaven (or hell), our pathway to the skies, begins — on a carpeted walkway passing through the perfume department, the duty free section, the travel bag area and any other number of bland shopping zones cynically devised with the right mood music, aromas, lighting and layout to part the air traveller from their cash.

Of course, prior to getting this far, we all had to queue in line to check in then line up to be scanned and searched along with our baggage by a bunch of security personnel who must have every ounce of humanity squeezed from them as part of their training, that is if they ever had any in the first place.

And when you do manage to board the plane, it's a hit and miss affair. Will you get the miserable 2013 version of Mandy with a bad attitude and a bad hair day to 'welcome' you aboard? The overworked, underpaid Mandy of the European budget airline variety who, unlike her 1960s and 70s chic counterpart, very often no longer yearns to be in the sky doling out pre-packaged rolls and bags of nuts to the masses but down on the ground doing anything — anything but this.

Mandy was an icon from a different age. It was a time before budget airlines. It was a period when air travel was glamorous and beyond those with a tight budget. A time when being an 'air hostess' was accorded an almost movie star status, jet-setting around the globe and catering to trendy champagne travellers with cash — lots of it — and who probably were movie stars. These days, air travel has all the mystique of an airport transit lounge on a dull day in

November. It's for good reason that economy class has become synonymous with the term 'cattle class'.

Can it really be this bad, though? Not really. High in the sky, I do occasionally still catch a glimpse of a smile, a greeting, an attitude and a face that takes me back. And on boarding my connecting flight, did I even hear someone whisper the phrase once immortalised by that poster girl, that angel in the advert? — "Hi, I'm Mandy, fly me."

Perhaps not. It was probably just the jet lag.

Chapter 13

And Finally — Food for Thought

Almost anyone who has described travelling in India has talked about the ‘vibrancy’ and ‘colour’ of the place, often when referring to things like festivals, marriage ceremonies, clothing, temple architecture or the many streetside fruit and vegetable markets. And this e-book has been no different.

So, in finishing, as someone who usually writes on food and agriculture, I want to discuss the fruit and veg markets that I have mentioned in passing at various points. These markets do not just add a dash of colour or vibrancy to the urban landscape; they play a key role in feeding India.

Step into any Indian city and you’re instantly swept into a sensory circus: the raucous chorus of bartering, the sharp zing of ginger mingling with the sweet perfume of guava and a rainbow avalanche of fresh produce as far as the eye can see. These aren’t just markets — they are living, breathing monuments to democratic, decentralised food systems.

In Chennai, many of these markets cannot be missed. They stretch along main thoroughfares for hundreds of metres and attract people from across the city, like the one on NSC Bose Road, near Madras High Court. Permanent features, with the stalls often employing entire families.

Others are smaller affairs tucked away down back lanes, probably only known to people in the immediate locale. I came across some of them by accident, especially after getting lost in a maze of alleyways. That’s how I found a bustling gem of a market at the far end of Kuppier Street on the northern

edge of Sowcarpet. I ventured off Mint Street and ended up in what felt like neighbourhoods entangled within neighbourhoods.

And then there are carts and one-person pitches that appear on street corners or side streets at certain times. Some people (often women) pitch up on the same spot each day with a limited selection of produce, supplementing household income; once sold, they are done for the day.

Regardless of their size or scale, India's streetside fruit and vegetable markets are indispensable. They represent economic vitality and cultural heritage. They cater to the daily needs of millions while supporting livelihoods for countless vendors. They are a cornerstone of the informal economy, which plays a critical role in India's urban employment.

The informal economy refers to economic activities that operate outside the formal regulatory framework, often characterised by small-scale, unregistered enterprises and self-employment.

Street vendors usually operate with minimal capital and resources but play a crucial role in food security and nutrition. They offer a wide array of affordable and nutritious foods, such as leafy greens like spinach and amaranth, legumes like lentils and chickpeas and seasonal fruits like guavas and bananas. This affordability is crucial in a country where a significant portion of the population depends on such markets for their daily food needs.

Streetside markets are often the primary source of fresh produce for low-income households, providing essential nutrients at affordable prices. Consider too that around 40 per cent of households do not have fridges for storing perishables. By offering fresh fruits and vegetables at lower prices than formal retail outlets, these markets ensure food security on a daily basis for urban populations while keeping costs manageable for families.

Whether they sprawl for hundreds of metres along city arteries or squeeze themselves into back alleys, streetside fruit and vegetable markets are the lifeblood of Indian neighbourhoods. And street vending isn't just a job. Low-income people aren't passive consumers here — they are active players in a food system that's more participatory and sovereign.

Vendors source their produce from wholesale markets, local farmers, intermediaries and sometimes even their own fields. Small farmers — some in cooperatives — rely on these vendors to get their veggies to the city. This direct farm-to-market link keeps food affordable and sustains local agriculture.

Streetside markets and family-run neighbourhood kirana stores are the last line of defence against the processed food invasion. They champion fresh, unprocessed ingredients and preserve traditional diets and crop varieties that might otherwise vanish into the abyss of instant noodles. In Tamil Nadu, for example, millet porridge vendors source grains from local farmers, keeping ancient crops alive and giving the cold shoulder to industrial rice.

India's kirana stores often have sacks of produce on display because they sell many agricultural products and daily essentials in unpackaged form by weight, which is a traditional, convenient way to serve local customers. These sacks typically contain items like rice, pulses, grains and sometimes fresh vegetables, allowing customers to buy exactly the quantity they need rather than pre-packaged amounts.

Many customers prefer to buy small quantities daily, and by stocking produce in unpackaged forms, kirana stores can also encourage consumption of minimally processed foods rather than packaged or ultra-processed items common in supermarkets.

Streetside fruit and vegetable markets can often trace their roots to ancient haats —weekly village bazaars that have evolved into today's urban hubs. They are not just places to buy and sell but social theatres where trust, gossip and community bonds are built over piles of mustard greens and baskets of jamun.

The produce on display can be like a living museum of India's culinary heritage. Vendors showcase regional specialties and seasonal delights — mangoes in summer, mustard greens in winter—reminding us that food revolves around seasonal cycles.

Some Indian states, like Tamil Nadu, are now split almost 50-50 between rural and urban populations. Supply chains are getting longer and more tangled. Up to 35% of fruits and vegetables can be wasted before they even reach the kitchen, thanks to poor cold storage and transport.

These inefficiencies worsen as produce travels farther from farms to consumers, and the shift towards chemically cultivated monocultures further erodes food diversity. This shift, prompted by the challenges of supplying perishables to distant urban markets, affects both food availability and dietary diversity.

Smaller cities maintain stronger rural-urban linkages, enabling faster transport of fresh produce and reducing spoilage. Protecting and empowering streetside markets and smallholder farmers and advocating for policies that prioritise local over global while slowing urbanisation are essential. This means shifting focus from rapid city expansion to strengthening rural communities.

Streetside markets empower communities to control their food systems, support sustainable, culturally appropriate diets and reduce reliance on industrial supply chains. They provide livelihoods for millions and keep

money circulating locally. In India, they help preserve the country's rich culinary heritage through regional and seasonal produce.

India's streetside fruit and vegetable markets are not relics of the past — they are essential to the present and future of urban food security, economic resilience and cultural identity. The strengthening of streetside markets and community-controlled food systems is essential for maintaining the vibrant, diverse food culture that is India's true hallmark.

In a world overrun by processed foods, rising food-related illnesses and corporate giants, these markets remind us that real progress means nurturing local traditions and empowering communities to reclaim their food systems.

And let's not forget their resilience: during crises like the lockdowns, these markets kept food flowing even as everything else shut down.

In India, we are seeing a battle between streetside markets and e-commerce platforms and food retail chains. This represents a fundamental conflict between food sovereignty and corporate control. While big corporations colonise retail spaces through predatory practices that appear beneficial to consumers while systematically destroying local economic ecosystems, the promise of convenience and competitive pricing masks deeper costs: loss of local autonomy, erosion of cultural diversity and concentration of economic power in the hands of distant corporations.

Asserting food sovereignty — the right of communities to define their own agricultural and food policies, emphasising sustainable production and consumption of healthy, culturally appropriate food — is key to this struggle.

